

VZCZCXRO3267
PP RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHMO #0345/01 0391440
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 081440Z FEB 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6491
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000345

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/05/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [EN](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS UNDER MORE
STRAIN

Classified By: M/C for Political Affairs Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4
(b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Russia and Estonia's already strained relationship took hits as Estonian contributions to the Schengen "blacklist" went into effect, closely followed by the beginning of trials in Tallinn from last May's Bronze Soldier incident. The MFA blamed new Schengen visa ineligibilities for some Kremlin-friendly youth group members on their participation in Moscow demonstrations, which Estonian diplomats refuted. MFA officials told us that Russia would formally protest the visa ban and noted that harsh sentences in Bronze Soldier trials could damage bilateral relations even further. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Following several months of strained but generally quiet relations after last May's Bronze Soldier incident, Estonia Section Head Yevgeniy Minakov told us recently that "additional irritants" in the bilateral relationship have made for a difficult atmosphere. He said the bilateral agenda was comprised of "negative issues," pointing out that no major official visits were planned at this time. Estonian Embassy contacts agreed that the current atmosphere was difficult, noting that a proposed Intergovernmental and Economic Commission was "on hold." However, Estonian diplomats emphasized the continuation of the official policy on both sides to tone down the rhetoric.

Estonian Visa Tensions

¶3. (C) Members of Nashi, the Kremlin-friendly youth group, put on Estonia's visa "blacklist" felt the sting when Estonia joined the Schengen Zone on December 21. Minakov told us that Nashi protesters, who were expelled from Tallinn for conducting a "symbolic honor guard" around the Soviet Bronze Soldier WWII memorial to protest its relocation, had been denied visas to all Schengen countries. He claimed that the Nashi who participated in large protests around the Estonian Embassy in May in Moscow were also denied visas, which the GOR considered an unfair measure because it involved Russian citizens demonstrating in a legal protest on Russian territory.

¶4. (C) Minakov told us that the GOR would make a formal protest of these ineligibilities to the EU, and would make sure the issue was on the agenda at the EU-Russia visa facilitation Council in Brussels. The Estonians were blacklisting Nashi members for "political" reasons, he claimed, and said the GOR was "considering" reciprocal measures. Press reports indicated that on February 6, Nashi activists organized a demonstration outside the Russian MFA to present a list of Estonian figures they wanted to be declared ineligible by the GOR.

¶5. (C) When asked how many members of Nashi had been affected by the blacklist, Minakov told us that only one

person had filed a formal complaint with the MFA, but cited media reports of others. He noted GOR irritation that the Estonians would not reveal the total numbers or reasons for their placement on the blacklist. He told us that while there was a chance to appeal the ineligibility, "in reality" they would not be able to do so without government support. Estonian diplomats told us that because the reasons for visa ineligibilities were not made public, the denial of Nashi members was being badly misinterpreted by the GOR.

¶6. (C/NF) Estonian diplomats stressed that individuals were neither made ineligible because of their membership in Nashi, nor because of their demonstrations at the Estonian Embassy in Russia, but because of other ineligibilities such as drug trafficking, crime, or visa fraud. Only about 10 individuals were ineligible because of their actions in Estonia during the Bronze Soldier riots. They told us that when Estonia joined the Schengen zone, about 500 people were added to the Schengen Zone's list of ineligible people, and that redress for ineligibilities could be sought through the Estonian Ministry of Interior.

Trials and Tribulations

¶7. (C) Minakov told us the GOR was "closely watching" the trial of three individuals, two Estonian and one of undetermined citizenship, which started in Estonia on January 14 for mass disorder around the Bronze Soldier event. He stated that "their actions were carried out in protest over the moving of a symbol of the fight against fascism." Although not Russian citizens, all of the defendants speak Russian, and Minakov expressed concern that the trials were to be conducted in Estonian -- which Estonian diplomats later explained to us would be translated for the accused, free of

MOSCOW 00000345 002 OF 002

charge. He said the GOR would not speak publicly about the trials, as it understood that the situation was sensitive and "did not want to make the situation worse" for the defendants, but warned that harsh sentencing would badly affect relations. Estonian contacts worried that the next court sessions were scheduled to occur at the beginning of May, near the anniversary of the riots, and were apprehensive that this could trigger a new round of protests.

Comment

¶8. (C) Official relations between Russia and Estonia have been civil in public, but resentment over the Bronze Soldier incident is alive and well. Local media reporting of both the trials and visa denials have only heightened the perception in Russia of Estonian "hostility."

BURNS